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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to describe the experiences of five preservice teachers who taught in a special practicum without cooperating teachers. Prior to the practicum, the student teachers were interviewed to ascertain their views on teaching reading and what they hoped to gain from the practicum to further prepare them to teach it. Each student was observed four times in the classroom. Postobservation time was set aside for discussion with the students and, when possible, with the supervisor. Following the practicum, interviews were conducted with the students to discover why they used particular organizational patterns, materials, and instructional procedures. Observations revealed that although each student had expressed a desire to develop fluent silent readers, much of the reading time was devoted to oral round-robin reading. While all of the student teachers were concerned about allowing children to read material that interested them, their early attempts at organizing literature groups and integrating social studies with the reading program floundered. As the semester went on, the basals became the only reading material used. No or few attempts were made to monitor the children's progress. The student teachers mentioned the following factors as important in influencing their actions and views toward reading instruction: school pressures, lack of confidence, classroom survival, limited time, and the content of the methods course. (HOD)

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IF YOU CAN'T BLAME THE COOPERATING TEACHER, WHO CAN YOU BLAME?

A Research Report Presented by

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at the

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IMPLEMENTING METHODS:

IF YOU CAN'T BLAME THE COOPERATING TEACHER WHO CAN YOU BLAME?

Introduction

Research has shown that as their reading methods course fades into past experience, numerous student teachers change their views and actions regarding the teaching of reading in ways that are dissonant with views recommended in earlier reading methods courses. While a review of the literature still reveals a continuing concern on the part of teacher educators about the limited impact that methods courses have on teaching practices, both during student teaching and after, and the considerable impact that cooperating teachers have on their student teachers' approaches to reading, other research has begun to illustrate the part that the ecological characteristics of classrooms and schools plays in shaping the behavior of those who work in schools. (Copeland, 1979; Doyle, 1977). If pre-service teachers student teach in a classroom without the influence of a cooperating teacher, might their views and actions toward teaching remain consonant with those espoused in the methods course? Would such an experience strengthen the impact of the course or would there be institutional characteristics inherent in classrooms that dilute that impact?

This report describes and analyzes the experiences of five pre-service teachers who taught in a special practicum without cooperating teachers. The purpose of this effort was to gain insight into the factors influencing the views and actions of the students and to determine why these decisions did or did not correspond to those earlier espoused by the pre-service teachers after participating in a reading methods course.

Methodology

The five subjects participating in this project were seniors who had been selected by a faculty panel from a pool of volunteers to take part in a special practicum in a classroom of 15 third and fourth graders. The panel who selected the students was composed of reading and mathematics methods course instructors who had taught the students, supervisors who had supervised their 9-week junior field experience, and the director of student teaching. The students chosen were those who had been judged by the panel to have the highest potential to become successful teachers. During the fall semester three student teachers were jointly responsible for all instruction; during the spring semester two new student teachers shared the same responsibility. There was no cooperating teacher present at any time. Because the students followed the regular school district calendar, their student teaching experiences were longer than the usual 12-week university practicum and they participated in all of the typical school district activities. Although there was no cooperating teacher, the students were frequently observed and held conferences with a university supervisor and the school principal.

Information was gathered through a variety of interviews and observations. The reading methods instructor and his teaching assistants were interviewed to gather information regarding the content that was covered, the reading practices recommended or discouraged, the assignments given, and the text and outside readings used in the methods course. Prior to the practicum, the student teachers were interviewed to ascertain their views on teaching reading and what they hoped to gain from the practicum to further prepare them to teach it. The university supervisors were also interviewed about their ideas regarding the teaching of reading.

Each student was observed four times in the classroom while teaching reading. Post-observation time was set aside for discussion with the students and, when possible, with the supervisor. Following the practicum, interviews were conducted with the students to discover why they used particular organizational patterns, materials, and instructional procedures.

Results

Reading methods course. The 16-week section of Elementary Education 336, Fundamentals of Reading Techniques, which the students had taken prior to student teaching met twice a week. One 2-hour class period involved a lecture given by an elementary education faculty member. The other 1 hour class period was a discussion session led by teaching assistants.

The students used Farr and Roser's Teaching a Child to Read, Heilman's Phonics in Proper Perspective, and Silvaroli's Classroom Reading Inventory as textbooks. They were required to take two hourly exams and a final, to write one research paper, and to administer the CRI to one child. Lectures included such topics as readiness, diagnosis, various methods of teaching reading, matching students and materials, teaching reading in the content areas, and organizing classrooms. In addition, discussion leaders gave short assignments related to basal readers, comprehension questions, and readiness.

Pre-practicum interview. The fact that the methods course had an initial impact on the students was obvious from the answers to questions in the pre-practicum interview. The student teachers began the practicum with views consonant with those espoused in the methods course. They voiced a desire to implement many of the broad goals disucssed in the reading methods course, such as:

1. Developing fluent silent readers through motivating techniques and word recognition and comprehension skills instruction.
2. Developing a positive attitude toward reading by allowing children to read a wide variety of materials in which they were interested.
3. Supplementing basal procedures and materials with individualized methods and materials. Literature groups, teacher-made materials, the language experience approach, and learning centers were popular choices.
4. Diversifying the organizational pattern beyond achievement groups. Interest and skill groups were mentioned by all five of the students; individualized reading programs were also high on the list for alternative organizational schemes.
5. Diagnosing formally and informally on a continuing basis. All five students mentioned using informal reading inventory as a way of matching students to materials and finding out about their abilities and needs. Each expressed a hope that he or she could "keep on top of things" through the year by observing and talking with the class.

It must be noted, however, that although they could express general guidelines, in many areas these students felt anxious about the "how-to-do" specifics of teaching reading. One student put it this way, "I feel reading is very important and it scares me as a teacher. I realize the responsibility that I have. I want the children to learn to read well and also to want to read. But I don't feel that 336 prepared me to work with slow readers, or to keep 20 kids busy while I work with 6; you know, management." Another said, "I know I'm going to have trouble teaching skills. I mean I know what the content of phonics is, but I

don't know how to teach any of it. I know you should teach a skill when you see a need for it but I don't think I'll know how unless there is something in the basal." Still a third commented, "I'm really scared about teaching slow readers. It worries me if I'll be sure how to help them. I don't know how to judge a worksheet. In my methods class they said we probably wouldn't need to use all of the worksheets included in the workbook, but how do I know if they are good or bad?"

Each of the students expressed a hope that the student teaching experience would help them gain confidence in teaching reading. One stated, "This is where I'm hoping to try out some ideas. We got a lot of theoretical information from our methods class, but that's not very helpful." Another hoped to "find out how to organize kids who have a variety of needs." And over and over the wish was expressed that "I'll find out where to start with skills, and how to present and teach them so that the kids will really know them."

Observations. As indicated earlier, each of the students was observed teaching several items during the practicum. The visits were scheduled so that at least one observation per student was during the first or second week of the semester and the final observation was during the latter part of the semester and the final observation was during the latter part of the semester when each student had complete control of the entire room. The observations reveal that each student was apparently overwhelmed by the actual experiences of teaching reading. Each of the following statements relate to the 5 goals discussed earlier.

1. Although each student had expressed a desire to develop fluent silent readers, much of the time spent in reading groups was devoted to oral round robin reading. This was true even in the highest reading group, which consisted of only three children. Sustained silent reading was a part of the class only when something else didn't run over into its alloted 20 minutes.
2. While all of the student teachers were concerned about allowing children to read material that interested them, their early attempts at organizing literature groups and integrating social studies with the reading program floundered.
3. As the semester went on the basals became more and more the only reading material used. Although all the student teachers had a desire to use basal material in a selective manner, by the end of the semester the basal had come to completely dominate their lesson planning. Teacher-made materials were introduced less and less.
4. The early attempts to individualize reading, which two of the students tried, slowly disappeared. The four achievement groups which were formed at the beginning of each semester never changed.
5. The informal reading inventories that were administered were used to determine instructional reading levels but were then put in file drawers, as were the results of a standardized diagnostic test which the school district required in all classes. No attempts were made to look for strengths and weaknesses, even for the lowest readers, who were about two years below grade level. Few attempts were made to keep informal records of the children's progress through the year.

Although the observations illustrate that the actions of these five students were often not consonant with the broad goals which they mentioned earlier, they did work hard in their classroom. In addition, each student took time out to observe other teachers in the district. They also met with a university reading professor for specific reading suggestions. They scoured book stores and libraries for resource books on how to teach such things as sight words and word recognition skills. Each of them cared for the welfare and education of the children. Some of them cared so much that they literally cried with frustration.

Post interview. Research done at the Institute for Research on Teaching (Barr & Duffy, 1978; Bawden, Buike, and Duffy, 1979) has illustrated that teachers' views toward reading instruction appear to be only one of several influences on their actions. Their views are "...filtered through and modified by other influences and, when applied to classroom practice (are) a unique reflection of all these influences." (Bawden, Buike, and Duffy, p. 12) Because the classroom observations illustrated that many of the actions taken by the five student teachers ran counter to the views they had espoused in the pre-practicum interview, a follow-up interview was conducted to allow the students to reflect on their experiences and to try to explicate some of the variables which they thought had influenced their actions. The students were thus given another opportunity to voice their views toward the teaching of reading.

During the post-practicum interviews the students were unanimous in mentioning the following factors as important in influencing their actions and, in some cases, changing their views toward reading instruction.

1. School pressures was the first variable mentioned by each student, thus supporting the work cited earlier (Copeland, 1979, and Doyle, 1977) on ecological factors. When they attempted to use an individualized reading program with one of their reading groups or tried to change basals, they were told by both the principal and other teachers in the school that reading instruction was to come from a basal and that only a certain basal could be used. The students were also strongly urged by some school personnel to teach reading using conventional achievement groups. It wasn't until almost the last month of school that the students found that some veteran teachers in the school had managed to "get around" these "rules." The student teachers had been told in their methods course that many school reading programs were basal-oriented, but they had not been provided with practical assignments which would help them to use a basal wisely while providing enrichment and/or remediation through other means. A frequently heard comment was, "I considered changing basals but the administration was against it. My low group was in the dullest basal around;" or "There weren't other materials available and I didn't know how to supplement the basal."
2. Lack of confidence was another factor often mentioned. Even though each student had previously voiced a desire to supplement basal procedures and materials with individualized methods and materials, the information obtained through follow-up interviews revealed that basal

materials were followed closely and seldom supplemented because the students felt something "important" might be missed and because they were not sure of either their ability to diagnose skill needs or to teach the skills on their own. One student commented, "I didn't like the workbooks and I didn't like the way I set things up, but I didn't know and still don't know what else to do." Another stated, "I'm still scared. I don't know how to teach sight words or skills. If I get a job teaching first grade my kids will never learn to read." The reality of their classroom experiences had convinced them to change their actions and their views regarding the use of supplementary materials and individualized methods. As one student expressed it," When I started this practicum I thought that I would only use the basal as the skeleton of my program. I did not want to follow the teacher's guide, but I found out that I'm not prepared to do what I wanted to do. I'm not even sure that I use the basal right. I know the basal is made by experts. I'll use it for my classroom in the fall. Maybe after I teach for a couple of years, I'll try something else." Although the methods course taught the content of reading, these students didn't have a good grasp of the methods used to teach the content.

3. Classroom survival was also an important variable influencing their decisions. Management and control were often the most immediate concerns. Sometimes just keeping 15 children quiet and busy became the primary reason for an assignment. One student noted, "My frustrations came from discipline problems. These children didn't know how to behave, they worked inefficiently and were irresponsible. I always had to spend

so much time keeping them quiet that I hardly had time to teach anything." Although classroom management and organization were discussed in the methods course, the students did not have the opportunity to practice the techniques, so they tended to forget them or to underestimate their importance.

4. Limited time was another important influence. Other subjects had to be taught in addition to reading. "My curriculum was controlled by the kids' behavior," said one student. "All of the neat things I wanted to do took too much time. I never had enough time to give background or teach vocabulary; we'd just read the story and do the worksheets." Another commented, "It's so hard to juggle time and keep kids on task with things to do. I didn't have enough independent activities ready to keep individual kids working while I worked with a group, and I found I had little time to make or plan activities." Listening to group oral reading, getting through the basal, and grading worksheets became important concerns for these students. "Maybe after I've taught for awhile I'll try something other than groups. But in the Fall, I want to be able to get three groups going well. I need more practice in management. It's not as easy as I thought."
5. The content of the methods course was also an important factor in the decision-making process for these students. It was a case of too much too soon and not enough soon enough. The topics emphasized in the methods course did not make an impact upon the students until they actually experienced those elements of the reading program; but by then

it was too late. They had forgotten much of what they had heard. In addition, some topics, such as dealing with outside pressures, did not appear to have been covered at all.

Typical comments were, "I learned what reading was supposed to consist of--you know graphemes, phonemes, that stuff--but we need more than one course in reading. I'd call 336 a theory course--kind of what is the content of reading. But we also need a course on how to teach those things." Another said, "We got a lot about what not to do but we didn't get many suggestions for what to do instead...like don't depend on round robin reading. Fine, but what do I do when someone says they like to read orally? I didn't know any other way to do oral reading." A third mentioned, "In the whole university there is not enough hands-on--we need to be out working while we are learning. We need to have situations where we can say--here's how I'd handle that. You can't be taught some things in isolation; you have to be thrown into a situation." And finally one stated, "I thought I knew how to teach reading and just needed practice. Now I know that some of my original ideas were fine for an experienced teacher but not for me. Some of my ideas were good but not realistic for where I am right now. The experience helped me to see what I can and cannot do at first."

Conclusions and Implications

Teacher educators have been too ready to blame the impact of the cooperating teacher for many of the poor teaching practices seen in student teaching situations and later in regular classrooms. These interviews and observations

illustrate that even pre-service teachers who do not have a cooperating teacher often act in ways that are dissonant with views they espoused immediately after taking a reading methods course. And, in some cases, they even change their views toward reading instruction.

Each of the student teachers expressed the fear of being unsure of "how to teach." They knew what to teach and even were familiar with some diagnostic tools, but they did not know what to do with the information they had. While there is no magic in "how to teach," we must introduce our pre-service teacher to the simple steps of apprising pupils of what is being taught and why it is being taught and why it is important, of demonstrating and modeling skills, of giving practice in the skills, of providing feedback, and of "recycling" the students who have difficulty.

However, a methods course must do more than simply present the content and a few skills and resources. A simple level of awareness is not enough. Our pre-service teachers, too, must receive practice and feedback in using these methods. They, too, must be "recycled" if their learning is not complete.

One conclusion which may be drawn from this program is that instruction in the teaching of reading should be a continual process. It should begin with a pre-service course which offers some basic instruction interspersed with real or videotaped observations of classroom teaching exemplifying the instruction discussed in class. In addition, the students should be allowed to try out some reading lessons to prepare themselves for their student teaching practicum. Instruction should continue into student teaching, where it would provide support, enrichment and remediation if necessary. It should also follow student teaching so that pre-service teachers can benefit from their new understandings of what teaching reading in a "real world" classroom is all about. And, in the best of

all worlds, it should be coordinated with in-service teaching so that the new situations, demands, and pressures that the neophyte teacher will experience can be met with further instruction and guidance. None of these ideas is new. Programs at other institutions have included such diverse offerings as pre-service tutoring experiences, the protocol movement, (with its associated videotapes and films), micro-teaching, combined reading methods/practicum courses, and performance or competency field-based experiences. However, none of these various offerings have been adequately evaluated. Professional educators who are designing these alternative teacher preparation programs often appear to be operating on expert hunches.

There is a need for longitudinal studies which take a more in-depth look at variables, such as those discussed in this report, which have the greatest effect on forming and changing pre-service teachers' views and actions regarding teaching. Although this effort concentrated on pre-service reading instruction, its implications can be generalized to other methods courses. Does coursework in reading or any other curriculum area have any long term effect on the beliefs and teaching practices of pre-service teachers if that coursework is not directly related to the pressures and day to day responsibilities connected with classroom teaching? What are the most important components of that coursework? Does the placement of courses relative to the practicum have any bearing on the formation of views and actions regarding teaching? Will direct observation of superior teaching help? What about using films or videotapes of those same superior superior teachers? Do analytical discussions that follow the viewing of films stimulate reflection in a student? Answers to questions such as these can only be found by well-evaluated longitudinal studies which might begin to identify ways that we can help pre-service teachers make better informed instructional decisions.

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